SOFT SHELL:
FATNESS AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION

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By

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Abstract

This thesis and accompanying exhibition examine some of the complexities of inhabiting a fat body. I track the developments and progress of my work over the duration of my master's degree, enabling me to locate a conceptually concise theme from which I have built my graduate exhibition; an exploration of inherited food values, a critical examination of the medicalization and discourses of the fat body, and a glimpse of the long-term effects of living at odds with, yet within these systems.

To give voice to the complexity of inhabiting a fat identity, I have developed a series of works that explore a variety of emotions and concepts through the lens of fatness. My exhibition support paper addresses my artwork through the following interconnected topics: food values, growth, obsession, utopia, protection, fear, and evolution.

Over the course of my research the most disturbing findings uncovered illuminated the ways in which the diet industry and medicalization of fat bodies contributes to the very real and alarming long-term physical, and dissociative psychological effects that can be perpetrated on a fat person. This research coupled with the influence of the writing of cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, and the influence of artists such as Cindy Baker and Allyson Mitchell directly informs the works presented in my graduate exhibition *Soft Shell*. Using strategies of exaggeration, surrealism, and critical questioning allows for a subversion of problematic beliefs about fatness.

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INTRODUCTION

Inhabiting a fat body poses a series of complexities. A fat body is a physical marker of *difference* that is immediately visible; it is different from what the dominant culture prescribes as ideal and is sometimes judged as a condition by choice. Fat people are assumed to be lazy and stupid, lacking in willpower, and failures in the quest for normative thinness. Fat theorists Braziel and LeBesco elaborate on the ways fat is equated with otherness: "frequently the fat body is read as corporeal presencing of other, presumably more intrinsic, incorporeal qualities or characteristics – the signifying of latency and lack. Fat equals reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary" (Braziel and LeBesco 3). Consequently, for the fat person, a tumultuous relationship with ones' body is common. In this thesis exhibition, I want the viewer to encounter the intricacy of inhabiting a fat body; what author Samantha Murray outlines as the possibility "to reconceive the 'fat' body as a site of numerous discursive intersections, the effect of normative feminine beauty, health, gendered hetero)sexual appeal, self-authorship, moral fortitude, fears of excess and addiction" (Murray 14). To give voice to the complexity of a fat identity, I have developed a series of works that explore a variety of emotions and concepts through the lens of fatness. My exhibition support paper will address my artwork through the following interconnected topics: food values, growth, obsession, utopia, protection, fear, and evolution. I will situate and discuss the body of work produced for this exhibition in relation to work produced during my MFA studies, theoretical and art historical contexts, my process, material choices, intent, challenges, successes and failures, reflections and resolutions.

FOOD VALUES

Food and fat people are inextricably linked in the mind of the public. Read any comment section of an online news article related to fatness and one will be confronted with the commonly held belief that fat people are constantly eating high fat, high carbohydrate foods and that is the reason they are fat. It is a simplistic and flawed representation but one that persists nevertheless. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray effectively sums up the contradiction: "As a 'fat' woman', I am aware that my body is visibly marked in our society as a symbol of abject lack of control. However, my life has been mapped by control for as long as I can remember. From measuring food portions to measuring my waistline, from weighing out my meals to weighing myself, I have been brought into being by these rigorous processes" (Murray 4). As a person who has spent over twenty years weight cycling (commonly known as yo-yo dieting), I felt compelled to examine my own values around food.

What started as an examination of the origins of my own body weight and food issues eventually led to an examination of my parents and then my grandparents' relationships with food. I began to understand that often our values around food are inherited, and are often informed by culture and class. My mother and grandmothers show/ed love with food, they rewarded achievements with food, and they comforted losses and hurts with food. My grandmothers' love and care came in the form of fresh bread baked every Monday for over fifty years, chocolate mocha cakes on birthdays, and delicately decorated shortbread cookies at Christmas. My maternal grandmother passed away in 2010, and the thought of how much of her food I had refused over the years due to strict dieting behaviour is devastating, given the knowledge I now have about the nurturing values she infused into the food she prepared.

Like my grandmother, my mother's food is imbued with love; it is a palpable ingredient that she works into every favourite meal, holiday dinner, and batch of cookies. She cooks and bakes for her family, her friends, neighbours, and coworkers. Some of my first memories of dieting and weight loss revolve around the period when my mother joined Weight Watchers. I remember her having a special binder to track her food intakes and progress, and I remember her going to weekly meetings that included public weigh-ins. We joined the weight-loss focused, women-only gym Curves together when I was fifteen; in addition to the cardio and weight resistance activities we also signed up for the low-carb, low-sugar, low-diet plan. We lost weight,

we gained it back, the cycle continues. Both of my grandmothers were/are preoccupied with weight despite their intense desire to nourish the people around them. Within these contexts the values I place on food are complex and often contradictory.

My grandmother made bread in unusual quantities (twelve loaves every Monday, an estimated 31,200 loaves over fifty years); her breadmaking history became the basis for the installation *What to do with this bread?* (fig 1). If a house is a metaphor for a person or a psyche, depicting my fraught and inherited relationship with food might look like an architectural ruin. The piece *What to do with this bread?* fills the gallery space as an eleven-by-seventeen-foot series of walls and structures rising up out of the gallery floor at various points, reaching up to three and a half feet tall. Preserved bread loaves become bricks held together with blue-tinted mortar; unlike clay bricks, bread and mortar create a sense of vulnerability and/or lack of stability. The walls are uneven in height, giving the impression of a structure that is incomplete or broken down. Amidst the bread ruin is the smaller sculpture *Three Generations* (fig 3), baked bread balloons forth from found ceramic containers that are mortared together vertically and decorated with shellacked preserved buns. This smaller sculpture serves as a compact study of the same ideas in *What to do with this bread?,* but highlights the intergenerational relationship present in my story. *What to do with this bread? and Three Generations* is a chaotic and askew abundance of nourishment, overtaking the viewer with a sense of unease and anxiety.

Fig. 1. Zoë Schneider, *What to do with this bread?,* total installation 11’x17’3.5’, 2018.

Fig. 2. Zoë Schneider, *What to do with this bread?* (detail), 2018.

Fig. 3. Zoë Schneider, *Three Generations,* 24” x 16” x 12”, 2018.

Fig. 4. Zoë Schneider, *What to do with this bread?* (detail), 2018.

GROWTH

The first series I developed in my master's studies examined how to depict the feeling of growing fat. The *Adipose* (fig 5-7) series was created as a meditation on how to explore horizontal growth with grace and defiance. This series combines minimal materials: denim, expanding foam, satin covered plinths - to speak to the feeling of being too much, an out of control entity, or of the boundedness experienced as a fat woman attempting to fit into a world made for smaller sizes. In the introduction to *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel state that "the fat or adipose tissue is regarded as a voracious parasite, an inessential and excisable mass, that suffocates and even consumes the 'ideal' or essential body" (LeBesco and Braziel 4). This passage serves as a valuable locus from which to approach the *Adipose* series. The vaguely body-like forms are overcome with mycelium-like growths, decidedly not parasitic as mycelium provides nutrients to the host body; in this way the *Adipose* sculptures are meant to represent nourishing growth. However, like the parasitic growth presented by LeBesco and Braziel, the foam growths in the *Adipose* series still embody an unnerving malevolent quality. This juxtaposition between nourishment and parasite creates a dichotomy that can be applied to the public reception of and reaction to excess fat folds on the body as disgusting and unwanted versus the actual use of fat as a source of stored energy and nourishment for the body.

The *Adipose* series is made by combining expanding foam and denim. Denim is a loaded material; in the western world denim began as a material of the working class, from the 1950's onward denim has been the uniform for the undeniably and impossibly cool. In a 1980 Calvin Klein commercial, Brooke Shields uttered the now infamous phrase about the ultra-tight denim jeans "You want to know what comes between me and my Calvin's? - Nothing" (Wilkinson), epitomizing the vast barrier between cultural capital (in this case blue jeans as thoroughly sexy and cool) and fat women. In the *Adipose* series fatty, puffy, sumptuous foam balloons forth from rips in abstracted denim shapes. Here the implied 'body' defies the parameters of the ideal form. It will not be contained. The sculptures rest upon sensuous satin plinths, invoking the image of satin bed sheets- a reference to the often problematic sexualization of fat bodies. Larger bodies are objectified by a small subset of 'chubby chaser's' or de-sexualized by the greater public. In mainstream media fat people are stereotypically depicted as either non-sexual or hyper sexual

entities, insinuating the lack of self-control that must have created the excess fat in the first place. Fat people are sometimes represented as so desperate for acceptance they take any kind of sexual attention, often a problematic type of attention that encompasses types of abuse or dehumanization. There is no place for agency, or personal narrative in these tropes.

The *Adipose* series explores how the behavior of material can imply a bodily state. In our graduate seminar, it was suggested that the foam material appeared to sit on top of the denim forms, rather than emerge from it. However, after reflection, I felt that the work articulates the underlying theme of growing fat because there is a separation between a person and the adipose tissue that grows on their body. In this instance, the fat resembles a separate entity with its own driving force, it grows outside the natural form of a body and takes on a non-human quality. In my life, during times of gaining weight, I have felt a disconnect between what my body is doing and what my brain is focusing on, the fat seems to accumulate on its own accord. Body dysmorphia is a common occurrence when gaining or losing weight.

Because of the way our North American society views and treats fat people it becomes easy and sometimes even necessary to mentally disassociate from the growing fat tissue. Diet and 'health' industries rely on a severe dissatisfaction in their consumers' self image. In order to preserve its relevance as an industry it must exploit and escalate this dissatisfaction through marketing and the normalization of the constant pursuit of thinness. In positioning the fat as separate from the self, we are able to enact an extreme eradication of the substance that would not be possible if we understood fat as akin to a limb or a sense. We must *know* fat as separate from the self in order to fully buy in to the ethos of the diet and health industries. This idea is espoused for manipulative means when Oprah in her Weight Watchers commercial says, "inside every overweight woman is the woman she knows she can be" (Weight Watchers), literally separating a person from the physicality of their own body. Similarly, with heartbreaking sincerity in the television series *My Mad Fat Diary* the protagonist Rae in a surreal momentary montage is able to unzip and step out of her fat body suit ("Touched"). In these two examples we see the ways the diet industry contributes to the very real and disturbing dissociative psychological effects on a fat person. For this reason, it was my intent to capture the psychology of separation through the ways the foam and the denim body form interact.

As a continuation of the ideas taken up in the *Adipose* (fig 8) series I chose to use bread dough to explore the feeling of growing fat. Common Baker's yeast is a single celled organism with a fascinating ability to respond to a scarcity of nutrients by making itself physically bigger. The yeast demonstrates proprioception – providing an understanding of ones' physicality in space and in relation to others by growing larger when a lack of nutrients exists by sensing its nutrient sparse surroundings; when it is larger it can increase its likelihood of encountering more nutrients. With this in mind, I grew bread dough out of found ceramic vessels and then undertook a preservation method of low-heat drying and applied shellac. The bread possesses the puffy growing quality of the foam used in the *Adipose* series but includes an element of spatial intelligence through the yeast, a quality that so many fat people become hyper aware of in their own bodies and movements through the world. I continued to use bread dough in subsequent works which will be discussed in the Food Values section.

Fig. 5. Zoë Schneider, *Adipose*, 20"x16"x11", 2016.

Fig. 6. Zoë Schneider, *Adipose,* 20"x20"x13", 2016.

Fig. 7. Zoë Schneider, *Adipose,* 28"x24"x15", 2016.

Fig. 8. Zoë Schneider, *Adipose*, 20”x16”x15”, 2018.

OBSESSION

I am interested in parallels between witchcraft and dieting; both practices are concerned with gaining control, rely on the power of will, are built upon prescriptive rules and programs (a spell, a weight loss plan), and feature deific status placed upon objects (superfoods, crystals, herbs). The *Moon Pools* series (fig 9) speak to the rhythmic behavior of weight cycling. In a Canada-wide poll, 48% of women and 37% of men self-report having dieted for weight-loss purposes in 2016 (Two-in-Five Canadians Tried to Lose Weight Over the Past Year). "Success rates for long-term weight loss are not good: of those who intentionally lost weight, most will regain about one-third of their weight within the first year, and virtually all will return to their baseline weight within five years (NIH Technology Assessment Conference Panel, 1993)" (Gaesser 38). For serial dieters there is a period of hope, determination, and heavy restriction, followed by a period of relapse, nourishment, feelings of failure and sometimes release. The moralistic thinking one develops is iterated by Rothblum and Solovay as "People feel superiority or self-loathing based on each calorie or gram of food consumed or not consumed, in each belt notch, pound, or inch gained or lost, in each clothing size smaller or larger" (Rothblum and Solovay xv). When we moralize eating, we can measure ourselves and then hold others to the same standard, we enact the same kind of social control that is embedded within organized religion, we count sins and we know who is behaving, and who is not.

Yo-yo dieting (or weight cycling) requires a mental energy that easily morphs into obsession,

> "and the coercive incoherence's of this palimpsestic discourse ensure that when, for example, dieting itself begins to be, as it is now being, labeled as a pathological, addictive "disorder" of lifestyle, that damning diagnosis of thinness or noneating does nothing to budge the damning diagnosis already delivered on fatness and eating. In a culture where the compulsory may become visible only as a manifestation of the individual will, medicine allows the concept of addiction to play a pivotal role; it ensures that any behavior, any condition of being, is subject to discreditation on the grounds that, while it appears to be an exercise of will, it is, in fact, *compulsive*" (Moon and Sedgwick 327ne23).

The *Moon Pools* series explores fat and feminine identity, weight gain and weight loss, and the ability for identity to fluctuate, through material, nature, science, and magic, spurred by culturally accepted obsession. The pool shapes represent a phase in the moon cycle, drawing parallels between the concept of waxing and waning in the moon, and gaining and losing in a corporeal sense. The pools are created using a modest mold making method. Like sand-candles, the concrete is poured into a trough dug into a base of sand and gravel. Smaller plaster casts of the waxing and waning moon shapes are pressed into the wet concrete. Each pool, depending on cycle (waxing or waning) is filled with a different substance selected to invoke growth and fullness, or loss and reduction. These substances include on the growth phase: almond oil, chamomile tea, peridot, titanite, and on the reduction phase: amethyst, blue apatite, green tea, and water. These items are selected for their correspondences in witchcraft or dieting. In witchcraft, a correspondence is a symbol used to invoke a desired outcome in a spell. It becomes a carefully collected and cared for object and gains an exalted status. I see a similarity in the objects used in contemporary witchcraft and the objects associated with weight loss. Calorie-counting apps, smoothie blenders, superfoods, and cure-all cleanses take on the same deific attributes as witchcraft correspondences; they become symbols deeply ingrained in the psyche of the person working to manifest a spell outcome or weight loss. In *Moon Pools* the crystals, weight loss teas, and oils are combined strategically to invoke outcomes of either loss or gain. Often associated with the feminine, both dieting and witchcraft demonstrate in the witch or dieter an urge to create control that arises out of living within a patriarchal and capitalist society. Our economy, governments, and social systems require the subjugation of *someone* in order to operate. Money and power fuel these systems. A fat person represents a rejection or refusal to be subjugated; it is lost income and lost control. When a person diets, they enact a form of *self control,* but they are still enabling the control imposed upon them, they are generating money and power for someone else. *Moon Pools* shows the desire to flip the power dynamic, to take control away and create it for oneself, but it does so in a way that acknowledges how difficult it can be, how it can be cyclical as one tries and fails and tries again.

While the *Moon Pools* depict a visual metaphor of growth and loss, they fail to investigate the obsession, feelings of failure, or long-term negative physical effects that weight cycling has on the body. This understanding of how the works failed to achieve my goals provided the

impetus to explore the concept of extreme weight loss practices and their impact on the body in later works which will be discussed in the chapter titled “Evolution”.

Fig. 9. Zoë Schneider, *Moon Pools,* 48”x48”x5”, 2016.

UTOPIA

Departing from previous work like the *Adipose* series and *Moon Pools*, in the project entitled *Numina* (fig 10) and *Numina's World* (fig 11), I imagined an alien utopia that works as a respite from a fat-phobic society. *Numina* is an alien goddess character that I created by donning an altered green morph suit and pink wig. I had myself three-dimensionally scanned and rendered into a six-inch-tall plastic action figure. *Numina* is conceived as the mono-theistic deity of the extraterrestrials known as the *little green men,* popularized in the 1940's novel by Harold Sherman *The Green Man* (Rutkowski 42); she is in turn the *Big Green Woman.* I imagined *Numina* to exist shamelessly in bodily contradiction to her devotees. Where the *little green men* are frail and inconsequential in size, *Numina* revels in her magnitude. In order to create a sci-fi maximalist landscape where *Numina* wanders and ponders her world, formulating the universe she desires, I used thrifted plastic dollhouses, plaster, Crayola clay, coloured and natural sands, and powdered temperas. Representing manufactured dwellings and organic elements, the structures in *Numina's World* are built by dipping found plastic toys into plaster and sand, dripping and pooling thickening plaster on surfaces, and hand building kids' clay into plant and net-like forms.

In this series *Numina* is presented as a solitary being, shaping and crafting her surroundings. She is the active creator, the maker of worlds. Artistic, intelligent, sexual, and dominant; *Numina* behaves in contradiction to her singular-minded, cloned followers the Greys (at some point in the 1950's the cultural perception of the *little green men* transformed in colour to the now common grey): "The archetypal alien, according to abduction literature, is the *grey,* a humanoid entity that is short in stature with a bulbous head, almond-shaped eyes and a slit like mouth." (Rutkowski 46). *Numina,* in opposition represents a freedom from an oppressive mindset. This is a play on diet culture, the Greys being a representation of the mass of people who have bought into diet culture, and *Numina,* representing a person who has broken free from and admonishes an oppressive and damaging dietetic culture.

It is productive to compare the representation of *Numina,* and the characteristics she embodies with Toronto-based artist and fat activist Allyson Mitchell's *Ladies Sasquatch* (fig 12). Featuring six large and twenty-five ancillary *she-beasts*, the individual figures are

confrontational in their size, and portray overtly sexual poses, othered identities, and beastliness. Mitchell explains that

> *Ladies Sasquatch* is meant to work as a point of departure for thinking about decolonized, queer, politicized bodies, sexuality and communities. In an attempt to imagine different sexual currencies *Ladies Sasquatch* valorizes cellulite, dirty fingernails, tattoos, big butts, fangs, collectivity and collaboration. The creatures in *Ladies Sasquatch* marry popular culture, native iconography and radical dyke culture to create a kind of queer utopian dream world (Mitchell).

Mitchell builds her 'she-beasts' to conjure feelings of fear, discomfort, and embarrassment in those who would benefit from or enforce the status-quo of a patriarchal, racist, fat-phobic, homophobic culture. Viewers that exist outside of these power structures will delight and find feelings of amusing kinship with the installation. Exaggeration and parody of negative associations with fatness are utilized to demonstrate the ignorant and ridiculous nature of fatphobia.

Parallels can also be drawn between *Numina* and Canadian artist Cindy Baker's performance piece titled *Personal Appearance* (fig 13), where Baker dons a professional mascot costume of herself and visits conferences, art events, and community activities that she would typically participate in in her daily life. She has quite literally created a caricature out of herself by stating:

> this is "hyper-me" while being not me at all. This is the pinnacle of performing self, because nothing about the performance is ACTUALLY me; it all merely resembles me. By becoming a caricature, I am automatically more loveable, fun, approachable and literally larger than life. By becoming a caricature of Cindy Baker, I nurture the myth of the character of that person/persona that is constantly examined and toyed with through my own practice (Baker).

A caricature serves as a simplified and exaggerated stand in for the self -- an immediately recognizable yet filtered version of an identity. So, what purpose does this serve in art and performance? Allyson Mitchell speaks to the nature of Baker's piece and begins to strike at the tactical reason for caricaturing the self:

> *Personal Appearance* turns the theory of performativity inside out by making it hyper visible. It is a "dragging" of the "self'. Functionally, *Personal Appearance* allows Baker to fulfill the demands of being present, showing up, accounted for, while simultaneously letting the artist off the hook - happily absent, protected, cocooned. It works like an external articulation of "going to my safe place"… With *Personal Appearance*, Baker is creating her biggest spectacle yet. Like a master of disguise, she encourages gawking while protecting herself from that gaze (Mitchell, *She is so Lucky*).

Numina, Mitchell's *Ladies Sasquatch,* and Baker's *Personal Appearance* use tactics of caricature, fat-drag and exaggeration to examine the tropes of fatness in joyful, fun, and accessible ways. Understanding fat-drag as an exaggeration of the stereotypical tropes associated with fatness in order to draw attention to the absurdity of said tropes, we can ask how caricature, fat-drag and exaggeration relate? Do they also remove the self from the 'site' of the body, conversely, can they offer a chance for radical embodiment? In performing the character *Numina* I am free to exaggerate the elements of my personality or body shape I may normally subdue in order to avoid body criticism, in this instance I am able to more fully inhabit the site of my body because I am not immediately recognizable as myself; I exaggerate but I do not caricaturize. One could infer that the ability of the fat artist to conceive of and enact their own versions of caricature, fat-drag, or exaggeration creates an emancipatory or cathartic effect.

Fig. 10. Zoë Schneider, *Numina's World (detail of Numina),* dimensions variable, 2017.

Fig. 11. Zoë Schneider, *Numina's World (aerial view),* dimensions variable, 2017.

Fig. 12. Allyson Mitchell, *Ladies Sasquatch,* 2006-2010. Sourced from www.allysonmitchell.com with permission from the artist.

Fig. 13. Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance: Exiting the changeroom at the Marimekko store in Kuopio (nothing fit!)*, ongoing performance. Sourced from www.populust.ca/cinde with permission from the artist.

PROTECTION

Ridicule, shame, denial of opportunity, and stigmatization are standard experiences for fat people in contemporary western society. Samantha Murray confirms the perception of bodily failure in fat people when she writes "It is no secret that most of the discursive constructions of the 'fat' female body in Western society are negative and assume a failure of will and bodily ethics" (Murray 7). When a person fails to conform to the standards of a dominant culture that person must be reigned in. Constantly being the butt of the joke, looked over for jobs or promotions, and scorned by medical professionals take a toll. A fat person must develop a thick skin. Inspired by this idea, I created the *Soft Shell* (fig 14) and *Fat Armour* (fig 15) works. *Fat Armour* features a helmet made in a European late-medieval penny-plate style with disks of salt dough in place of iron. Similarly, I developed shin and upper arm guards by layering disks one slightly over the other in order to build up an armoured surface. Decorative elements like metallic pom-poms and tin armadillo shapes intersperse the dough disks. The belly plate and back piece resemble an accumulative shell like that of a Cassidfly; layers of spray foam are interspersed with salt dough disks, thumb print cookie shapes, and pinched dough. Plastic rhinestones, coloured sand, and spray tan alter the surface and colours of the works, which become obscured with these accumulations. The materials used in the armoured pieces reference two ideas; first, the dough formed into cookie shapes evokes the classic adage "you are what you eat," while the bright, cheap and flashy elements are deflectors, focusing attention away from the fatness of the body – a tactic often employed by fat women with special attention paid to perfectly coiffed hair and precise and expressive makeup.

Fat Armour draws upon the familiar fat suit prop that is frequently employed in films and artworks. Where the traditional fat suit inspires comedy or enacts an internal fear, my suit accumulates the emotional toll. Katariina Kyrola describes the outcomes of fat suits worn by thin actors as two-fold "When viewers know that fatness is "just" special effects, it seems to give permission to joke more openly and crudely then when a real fat person is implicated" (Kyrola 114). This speaks to feelings of humour or pity, but little else. She goes on to say "Fat suits can still awaken their wearer and the viewer to face the privilege of slimness" (Kyrola 114). Fat suits are temporary and although they give a visualization of fat, they do not speak to the lived and accumulative effects of inhabiting a fat body. Real fat bodies are heavy. They have strong

muscles from carrying extra weight. They also carry a metaphorical weight of daily ridicule and oppression. This is what I imagined for *Fat Armour*, a public and physical visualization of an internalized and often invisible fat experience.

Soft Shell takes the ideas explored in *Fat Armour* one step further. A large bright blue velour pillow shell sits on the floor. Its puffy pillow-like humps made of velour stuffed with fibrefill are topped with large macaroni pasta encrusted spikes. The macaroni shapes are painted blue, pink, gold, and yellow; bright, bold, and toy-like. Pasta has a rich history of symbolisms closely tied with gluttony and cheap nourishment for the poor. In our current climate of "clean eating," carbohydrates found in pasta and bread are demonized. I utilize this substance as a tool for protection (in this instance the spikes on the shell) inviting a look at the absurdity of the charge. This further complicates the "you are what you eat" adage by weaponizing the offending food, refusing a passive accumulation for a tactical armament. "You are what you eat" is often touted with the attempt to shame or enforce an idealized way to eat, by building a form of protection out of a food that does not fit within the idealized way of eating the implied meaning placed on the food is challenged.

I created *Fat Armour* and *Soft Shell* in response to the hostility in our culture around fatness and weight gain. My artwork was born out of provocation and fueled by feelings of anger and injustice. In making these works I began to feel conflicted about the implications created in the navigation of the ideas explored. I have been careful to articulate that fat oppression is very real and of pressing concern, and that it affects not just fat people but lives as a fear-of-fat in the minds of most people in contemporary culture. In making objects of protection there emerges an inference of victim. While working on *Fat Armour* and *Soft Shell*, I encountered the writing of Trinh T. Minh-ha which galvanized a shift in my thinking about the ideas I was exploring. Of importance are her ideas around self-representation as other:

> "How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or in a naïve whining about your condition? In other words, how do you forget without annihilating? Between the twin chasms of navel-gazing and naval-erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery" (Minh-ha, 28).

Questions around how I was depicting fat identity moved to the forefront of my mind and galvanized a shift to a new body of work that would focus more directly on the fat experience. I began to think about the internal conflicts I had with fat and health, the reasons for why fatness is becoming more commonplace, and the motivations behind bodily homogeny. These themes have widespread merit as they affect many people regardless of size; they beg conversation and criticality over blanket declarations of worth or depiction of past insult or injury.

Fig. 14. Zoë Schneider, *Soft Shell,* 55”x35”x30”, 2017.

Fig. 15. Zoë Schneider, *Fat Armour*, dimensions variable, 2017.

FEAR

Unbeknownst to many, a by-product of long-term weight cycling can be a higher likelihood of the development of gallstones in the gallbladder; an extremely painful accumulation of calcified cholesterol.

> For women, but less so for men, obesity is a strong risk factor for gallstones, and this risk is increased during weight loss. Between 10% and 25% of obese men and women may develop gallstones within a few months of beginning a very low calorie diet, and perhaps one third of these will develop symptoms of gallstones. Persons with the highest body mass index before weight loss and those who lose weight most rapidly appear to be at the greatest risk for gallstones (Everhart).

This medical affliction is more common in women; it is greatly exacerbated by yo-yo dieting, and often results in the surgical removal of the gallbladder all together. Gallstones also have a higher likelihood of afflicting fat people, and people who have undergone bariatric amputation (Everhart), *damned if you do, damned if you don't*. As a fat activist, and a believer in natural body diversity, it is difficult to digest that there is an increased health risk in carrying a large amount of body fat. In fact, dieting in my teens may have exacerbated my fatness as an adult, paving the way for a long history of disordered eating "Adolescent girls who diet are at 324% greater risk for obesity than those who do not diet" (Stice et al., 1999, nedic.ca). I feel a desire to disprove the concern trolls, diet companies, and obesity doctors because I believe it is the societal fear of fat that has created many of the unhealthy relationships people have with their bodies. Fat activism and fat acceptance (or size acceptance) encourage the right to bodily autonomy for all people, and endeavors to end fat-phobia. Fat acceptance along with a branch of academia called fat studies examines the bias that clouds much of the research on obesity. This movement struggles, however, to satisfy the inner voice asking *what if they're right? What if I am doomed to a life of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and gallstones?* It is this persistent feeling along with my mother's own gallstone diagnosis, and the writing of Trinh Minh-ha discussed previously that prompted me to examine the voice and the feelings of conflict, and make a series related to fat health.

The *Gallstones* (fig 16 and 17) began as two wall works made of satin, fringe, and fibrefill; the surface encrusted with pearls, beads, stones, glitter, sequins, and beeswax. These

works are pillow-like, sumptuous, decadent, and hyperfeminine. I developed these works as an attempt to unify other artistic works in the series. However, the work felt too decorative and flat because it lacked a suggestion of the body. Gallstones are a strange combination of mineral and fleshiness, possessing an uncanny quality that the initial *Gallstones* seem to lack. Not wanting to belie my internal fears, I chose to focus on the morbid curiosity I felt for the growths. I then made a series of table-top sized sculptures (fig 18 and 19), using deflated silicone toys as a mold. The result was a fleshy body-like form made from pastel tinted plaster. The form resembles flesh folds/rolls, interspersed with cakey recycled foam and braided macramé rope that fray at the ends. In these works, the plaster references the body, the foam suggests a decadent and fattening carbohydrate, intended as a DNA chain (three ropes in a braid- mother, father, and child) – in this case fraying to represent genetics gone awry. The scale of the individual gallstone is much larger than life, weighing from two to eight pounds. They have a toy-like quality and sit on a gallbladder shaped island made from an inverted pond form painted with multiple textured paints (fig 20). These gallstone forms are bizarre, body-like, and uncanny. They implicate their conditions for growth in material choices, while maintaining an ambiguity representative of my own feelings of conflict between fat pride and fear of physical ailments.

Fig. 16 and 17, Zoë Schneider, *Gallstones,* (left) 40”x30”x5”, (right) 40”x35”x6”, 2017.

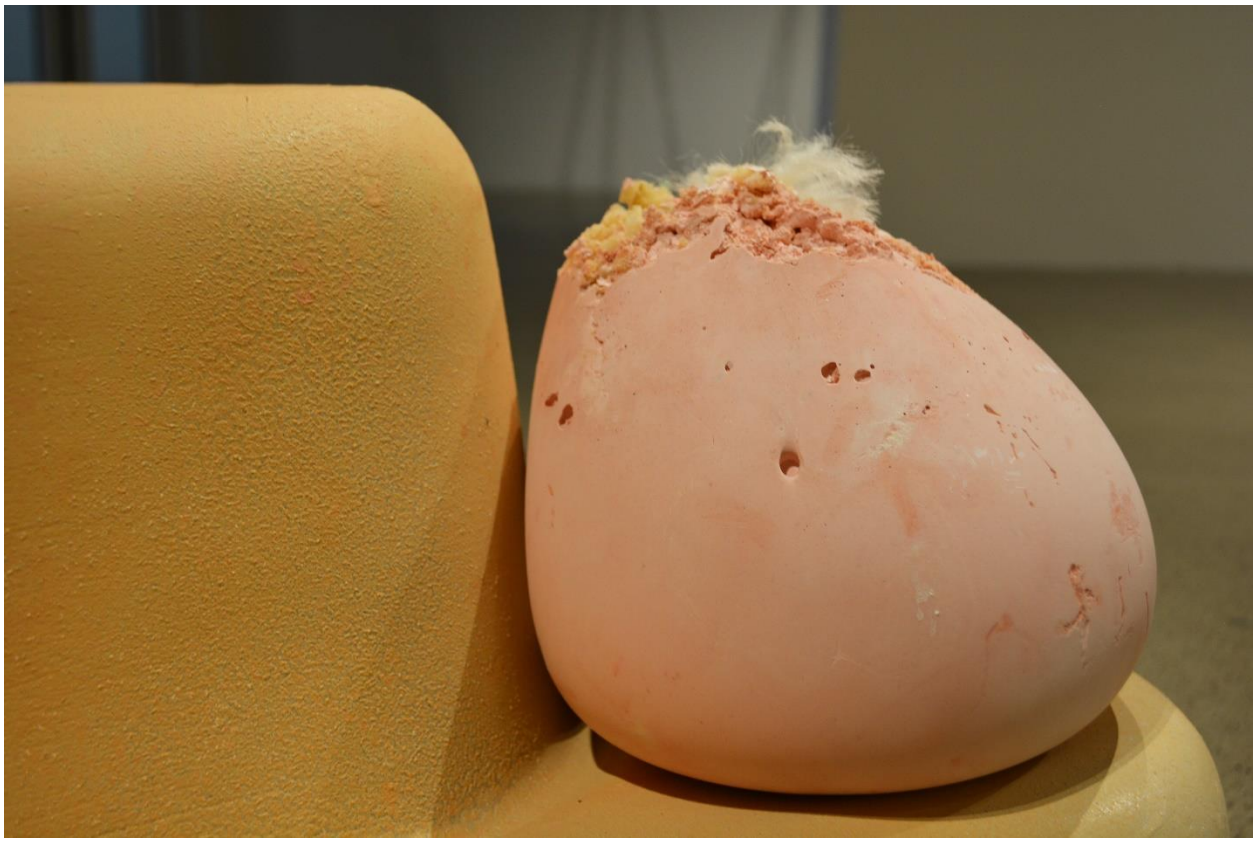

Fig. 18 and 19. Zoë Schneider, *Gallstones* (detail), dimensions variable, 2018.

Fig. 20. Zoë Schneider, *Gallstones,* 66”x74”x23”, 2018.

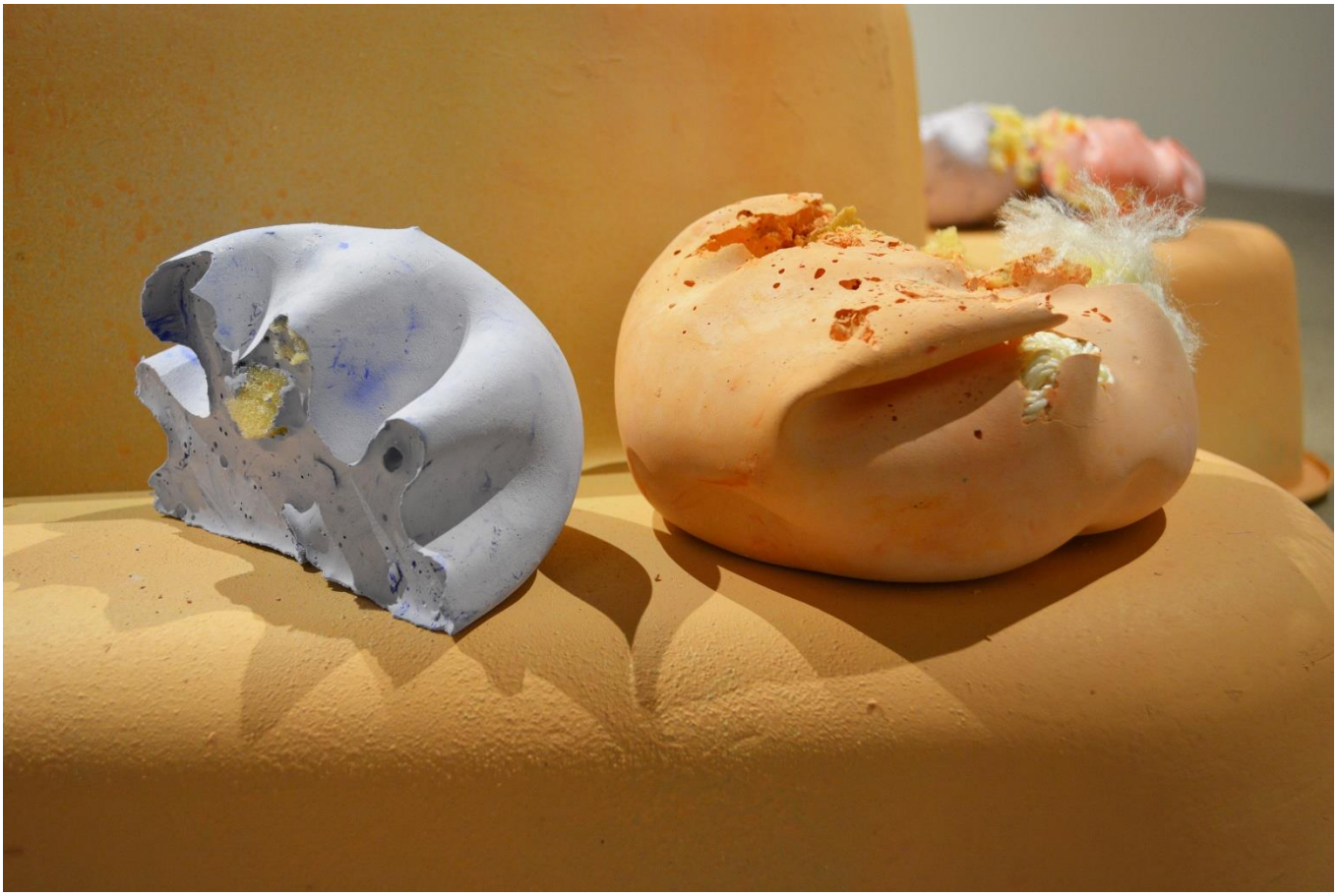

Fig.21. Zoë Schneider, *Gallstones* (detail), dimensions variable, 2018.

EVOLUTION

Changes in the body occur due to changes in the environment or systems we inhabit. These changes can be environmental or sociological shifts like food subsidies for meat, dairy, and corn products over vegetables, cities designed for vehicles over pedestrians, and continued failed weight loss attempts that alter the body's metabolism and psychological relationships with food. These factors have been identified and accepted, yet we engage in a contemporary version of puritanical thinking about how the individual should respond to change, and in turn how a body should behave and look. In the forward of *The Fat Studies Reader* Marilyn Wann describes the problem with pathologizing fatness:

> Calling fat people "obese" medicalizes human diversity. Medicalizing diversity inspires a misplaced search for a "cure" for naturally occurring difference. Far from generating sympathy for fat people, medicalization of weight fuels anti-fat prejudice and discrimination in all areas of society. People think: If fat people need to be cured, there must be something wrong with them. Cures should work; if they do not, it is the fat person's fault and a license not to employ, date, educate, rent to, sell clothes to, give a medical exam to, see on television, respect, or welcome such fat people in society. (Wann xiii)

Unfortunately, our economy has many stakeholders in the 'war on obesity' who would stand to lose massive wealth if we shifted our thinking about fat bodies. "The U.S. Weight Loss & Diet Control Market" report released from MarketData states that "The total market grew to $66.3 billion in 2016" (www.dietbusinesswatch.com). As we mechanize most facets of contemporary life, we also endeavor to mechanize bodies in how they are treated medically. We can think about standardization at work in public policy, the spaces we inhabit, the furniture available to the average person, the technology we use; standardization works in terms of keeping costs low, but it becomes extremely harmful when applied to the body.

If we view our bodies within an evolutionary context, as naturally diverse, and shaped by the ecological, political, and economic systems we inhabit, new ways of thinking may evolve. This means pejorative phrases like double chin, 'spare-tire', or 'cankle' would cease to be. Thinking about fatness through the lens of evolutionary speciation borne out of cultural and

economic changes (and a suspension of disbelief), has created opportunities to confront conventional wisdom on fatness. Using Darwin's Galapagos finches as an example,

> Many species have been derived from a common ancestor and fill a variety of ecological niches. They look similar, have similar courtship displays, but do ecologically different things. The morphological trait in which they differ most is the beak: its size and its shape. These are features that can be interpreted unambiguously in terms of their functions of gathering and dealing with different food items, including nectar and pollen in flowers, insects beneath bark, snails, fruits, seeds and even, in one bizarre case, the blood of seabirds. (R. Grant and P. Grant, Darwin's Finches)

Imagine if we could think about phrases like muffin-top or double-chin in the same way? Art work can serve as a means to re-contextualize and re-imagine the human body divorced from disapproving moralism by exaggerating an idea to the point of absurdism, this allows an established value to be questioned, and potentially rewritten. This thinking is at play in the scale and playful quality of the *Gallstone* series, and in the *Gastric Manipulation* series as it depicts the methods medical industries would use to control the evolving fat body.

The three works in the series *Gastric Manipulation* (fig 22) sit in an oversized tri-scale hung from the ceiling. Three larger than human stylized ribcages are made with spray foam, mortar and plaster bandages with a wooden dowel as a spine. Within each ribcage a grouping of organ-like objects made of tinted silicone are bound, bisected, or stuffed with toy wooden snakes. The scales represent three of the institutions who have an interest in pathologizing the fat body: the diet industry, the medical industry, and the patriarchy via an interpretation of Foucault's *Panopticon* by Giovanelli and Ostertag is described as the:

> …cosmetic panopticon, the media induce a state of permanent surveillance and judgement around concerns of physical appearance and standards of "beauty"… Viewers are simultaneously reminded that violating expectations of physical appearance, perhaps by being fat and female, will be recognized and subject to gossip and discrimination. (Giovanelli and Ostertag 289)

The ribs wrapped in bandages represent the medicalization of the fat body. While the snakes manipulating the organs embody the caduceus, the ancient symbol commonly used to represent

medicine. The snakes' interventions on the organs represent three different types of bariatric surgeries designed for weight-loss: Gastric bypass, Sleeve gastrectomy, and Intra-gastric balloon:

> …the patient's anatomy is irreversibly changed, and they lose a significant amount of weight quickly. Both procedures result in malnutrition, requiring patients to take multivitamins and other supplements for the rest of their lives. Other risks and complications include hair loss, ulcers, leaks, gastric bleeding, bowel obstruction, gallstones, and dehydration. These are all fairly horrifying risks, but (the medical establishment has decided) they are less horrifying than the medical risks of fatness.
>
> People who choose weight-loss surgery trade one kind of health for another. (Gay, What Fullness Is).

In the *Gastric Manipulation* works, the controlling violence that is enacted on fat bodies is presented as a futile and manipulative undertaking, emphasizing the monetization of the pathologization of fat. The exaggerated scale of the ribcages speaks to a future of evolved fat physiology.

Similar ideas are explored in Rachel Herrick's *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS)* (fig 25). The faux conservationist organization for the creature called the *Obeast* is a fully tongue-in-cheek play on the stereotypes and medicalization of fat bodies. The breadth and meticulous detail of the project is enormous in scope; the two-part book series is detailed by Pamela Grombacher,

> I found all the trappings of an interdisciplinary academic journal, including the editor's (Herrick's) introduction, a series of scholarly articles complete with careful citations and explanatory footnotes, short biographies of its contributors, and a list of included figures and illustrations. Essay topics ranged from the obeast's evolutionary history, taxonomy, anatomical functions and mating behaviours to its commercial value in Georgian England and spiritual relevance in American Protestantism (Grombacher, 47).

The "project satirizes the stigma and anxiety around obesity, using the tropes of natural history and nature conservation. The project is primarily conducted as a scientific organization that coordinates obeast field research and educates the public about the North American Obeast through museum exhibitions, videos, public events, membership, publications, and an

informative website" (Herrick). The *Obeasts* are decidedly benign, covered in their signature floral muumuu pelts, black spectacles, heavily fringed haircut, and displaying an exaggerated lethargy; these creatures provoke the opposite of disgust, they are too gentle and unassuming, save for their size to illicit the violent feeling of disgust. The shape, nature and stereotypical constructs of fatness are parodically employed as a method to denounce its inherent issues. Herrick uses caricature and exaggeration to structure her work. Herrick's project marks a thorough and advanced play with the subject of fatness, pathologization of fat bodies, and problematic societal constructs.

Fig. 22. Zoë Schneider, *Gastric Manipulation,* 103”x52”x42”, 2018.

Fig. 23. Zoë Schneider, *Gastric Manipulation* (detail), 2018.

Fig. 24. Zoë Schneider, *Gastric Manipulation* (detail), 2018.

Fig. 25. Rachel Herrick, MOCS @ the ICA in Portland, ME, 2011, MFA thesis exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland ME. Sourced from www.rachelherrick.com with permission from the artist.

GRADUATE EXHIBITION

Soft Shell (tentative title) includes three bodies of work discussed previously: *Gallstones, What to do with this bread?,* and *Gastronomical Manipulation.* Installed at AKA artist run centre in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the exhibition runs from August 20th- August 31st 2018. Upon entering the gallery, the visitor is confronted with two spaces separated by a wall. The smaller section on the left is installed with the *Gastronomical Manipulation* installation. Hung from the ceiling, a tri-scale (or three-armed weigh scale) is suspended with three stylized ribcages set in each metal pan. The ribcages overflow with silicone 'organs' bisected with wooden toy caduceus snakes. This work dominates the space vertically but provides room for the viewer to move around the hanging installation. The larger room to the right houses the large *What to do with this bread?* installation diagonally bisecting the space from the farthest corner. Built with bread bricks and tinted mortar, the architecture is haphazard; sinking in some areas, over crusted in others, some walls left unfinished. Within the *What to do with this bread?* is the *Three Generations* ceramic statuette. To the left sit a garden of gallstone sculptures sitting upon their gallbladder shaped support. The placement of the works and installations creates a valley like flow to the exhibition. These works connect with each other conceptually in their investigation of systems, and aesthetically with the developments made in my work throughout the duration of my MFA degree.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the duration of my MFA degree I have explored a variety of facets of fat identity. Beginning with the fundamental and visceral feeling of growth, which led to an exploration of nourishment and the body presented in the final installation. Uncovering the obsession enacted in weight cycling would also inform the final bread installation, probing a further consideration beyond my own relationships with food to that of my family. *Numina* served as a joyful reprieve from the difficult subjects in my other works and positioned itself in relation to the works of established Canadian artists working with similar themes. Though cathartic to make, the issues explored in *Fat Armour* would prove to be victimizing in tone; moving forward an opportunity to appropriate the diet industry's concept of fatness can be activated to point to its inherent issues. In future works, combining the symbolisms and aesthetics of religion/cult and diet lifestyles will offer a more critical examination of the inner workings and problematic aspects of the diet and wellness industries from a distanced perspective. The writing of theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha galvanized for me a new approach to thinking about representations of fat. Research and personal experiences collided to inspire the various *Gallstone* and *What to do with this bread?* series. These works shifted my focus and enabled me to locate a conceptually concise theme from which to build my graduate exhibition; an exploration of inherited food values, a critical examination of the medicalization of the fat body, and a glimpse of the long-term effects of living at odds with, yet within these systems. The exploration of fat identity, associated social justice movements, the creative works produced by fat artists, and the effects of fat discourse has been immensely nourishing, and will continue to be a source for artistic motivation.

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